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Mother

Owen Wister, Dodd, Mead & Company

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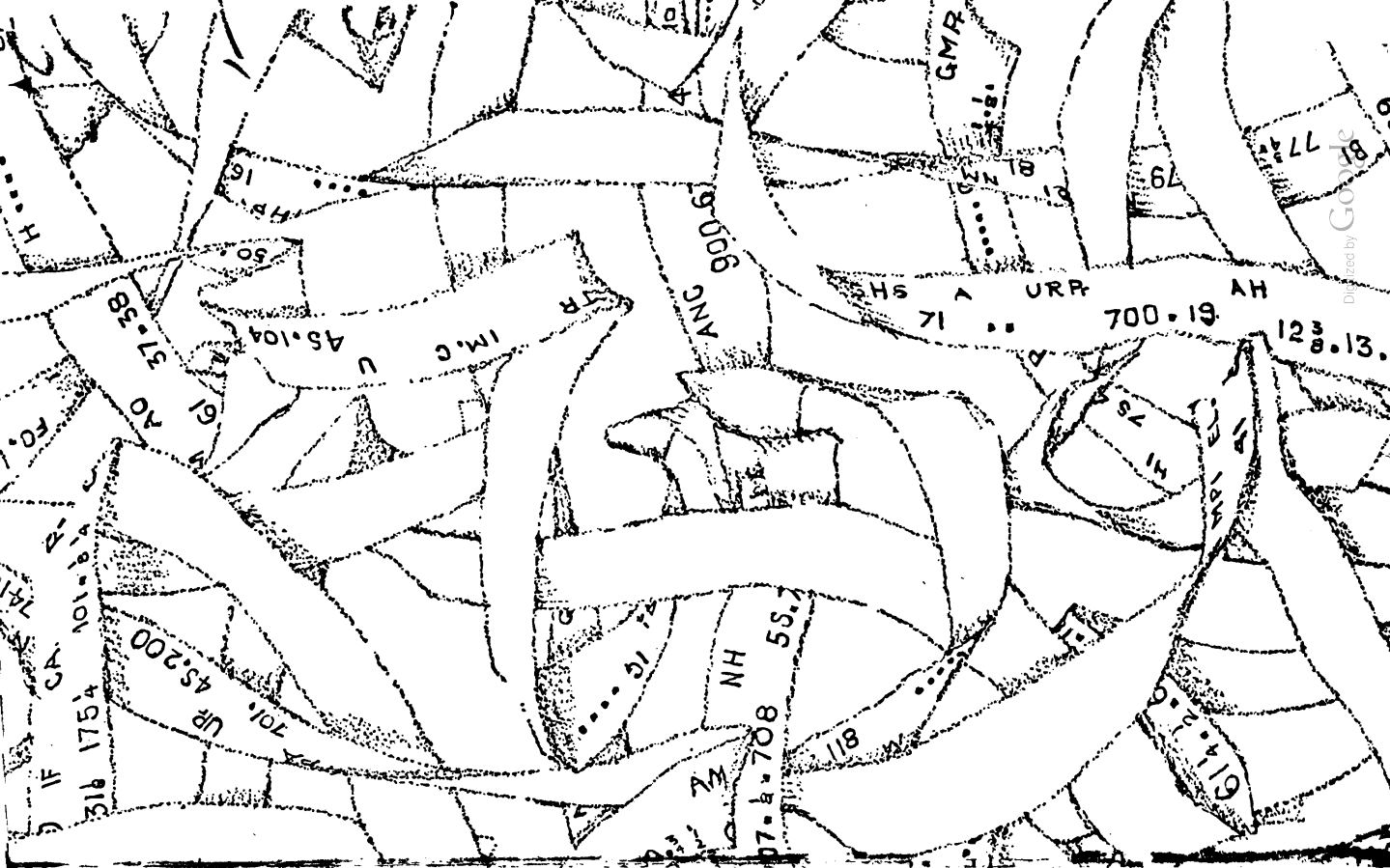
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MOTHER

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Anna Studt.
Brooklyn. N. Y.

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"I hate that woman" (p. 73)

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MOTHER

By

OWEN WISTER

Author of "The Virginian"
etc.

Illustrations &
Decorations by
JOHN RAE

New York
DODD, MEAD & COMPANY
1907

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TO
MY FAVOURITE BROKER
WITH THE EARNEST ASSURANCE
THAT MR. BEVERLY IS NOT MEANT FOR
HIM

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NOTE

In 1901, this story appeared anonymously as the ninth of a sequence of short stories by various authors, in a volume entitled *A House Party*. It has been slightly remodelled for separate publication.

June 7, 1907 — Owen Wister

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ILLUSTRATIONS

"'I hate that woman.'" (In color) *Frontispiece*
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"I should like to smash the clock" *Page* 23
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"One of them was fifty-five, and he still received six hundred dollars" *Page* 37
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"We paused before brown old headstones with Beverly upon them." (In color) *Page* 77
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"He then ran the tape from the ticker through his clean, strong hands" *Page* 89
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MOTHER

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MOTHER

WHEN handsome young Richard Field—he was very handsome and very young—announced to our assembled company that if his turn should really come to tell us a story, the story should be no invention of his fancy, but a page of truth, a chapter from his own life, in which himself was the hero and a lovely, innocent girl was the heroine, his wife at once looked extremely uncomfortable. She changed the reclining position in which she had been leaning back in her chair, and she sat erect, with a hand closed upon each arm of the chair.

"Richard," she said, "do you

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think that it is right of you to tell any one, even friends, anything that you have never yet confessed to me?"

"Ethel," replied Richard, "although I cannot promise that you will be entirely proud of my conduct when you have heard this episode of my past, I do say that there is nothing in it to hurt the trust you have placed in me since I have been your husband. Only," he added, "I hope that I shall not have to tell any story at all."

"Oh, yes you will!" we all exclaimed together; and the men looked eager while the women sighed.

The rest of us were much older than Richard, we were middle-aged, in fact; and human nature is so constructed, that when it is at

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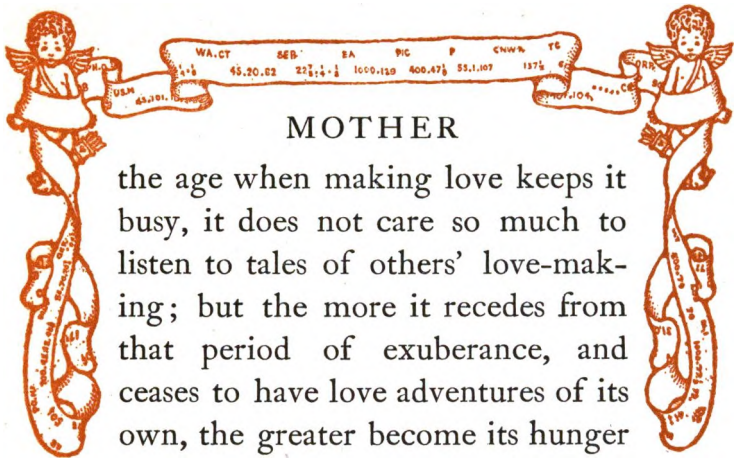
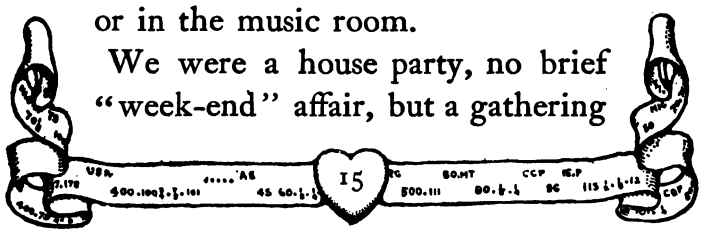


the age when making love keeps it busy, it does not care so much to listen to tales of others' love-making; but the more it recedes from that period of exuberance, and ceases to have love adventures of its own, the greater become its hunger and thirst to hear about this delicious business which it can no longer personally practise with the fluency of yore. It was for this reason that we all yearned in our middle-aged way for the tale of love which we expected from young Richard. He, on his part, repeated the hope that by the time his turn to tell a story was reached we should be tired of stories and prefer to spend the evening at the card tables or in the music room.

We were a house party, no brief "week-end" affair, but a gathering



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whose period for most of the guests covered a generous and leisurely ten days, with enough departures and arrivals to give that variety which is necessary among even the most entertaining and agreeable people. Our skilful hostess had assembled us in the country, beneath a roof of New York luxury, a luxury which has come in these later days to be so much more than princely. By day, the grounds afforded us both golf and tennis, the stables provided motor cars and horses to ride or drive over admirable roads, through beautiful scenery that was embellished by a magnificent autumn season. At nightfall, the great house itself received us in the arms of supreme comfort, fed us sumptuously, and after dinner ministered to our

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middle-aged bodies with chairs and sofas of the highest development.

The plan devised by our hostess, Mrs. Davenport, that a story should be told by one of us each evening, had met with courtesy, but not with immediate enthusiasm. But Mrs. Davenport had chosen her guests with her usual wisdom, and after the first experiment, story telling proved so successful that none of us would have readily abandoned it. When the time had come for Richard Field to entertain the company with the promised tale from his life experience, his hope of escaping this ordeal had altogether vanished.

Mrs. Field, it had been noticed as early as breakfast time, was inclined to be nervous on her husband's account. Five years of married life

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had not cured her of this amiable symptom, and she made but a light meal. He, on the other hand, ate heartily and without signs of disturbance. Apparently he was not even conscious of the glances that his wife so frequently stole at him.

"Do at least have some omelet, my dear," whispered Mrs. Davenport urgently. "It's quite light."

But Mrs. Field could summon no appetite.

"I see you are anxious about him," Mrs. Davenport continued after breakfast. "You are surely not afraid his story will fail to interest us?"

"No, it is not that."

"It can't be that he has given up the one he expected to tell us and can think of no other?"

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"Oh, no; he is going to tell that one."

"And you don't like his choice?"

"He won't tell me what it is!"

Mrs. Davenport put down her embroidery. "Then, Ethel," she said with severity, "the fault is yours. When I had been five years married, Mr. Davenport confided everything to me."

"So does Richard. Except when I particularly ask him."

"There it is, Ethel. You let him see that you want to know."

"But I do want to know. Richard has had such interesting experiences, so many of them. And I do so want him to tell a thoroughly nice one. There's the one when he saved a man from drowning just below our house, the second summer, and the man turned

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out to be a burglar and broke into the pantry that very night, and Richard caught him in the dark with just as much courage as he had caught him in the water and just as few clothes, only it was so different. Richard makes it quite thrilling. And I mentioned another to him. But he just went on shaving. And now he has gone out walking, and I believe it's going to be something I would rather not hear. But I mean to hear it."

At lunch Mrs. Field made a better meal, although it was clear to Mrs. Davenport that Richard on returning from his walk had still kept his intentions from Ethel.

"She does not manage him in the least," Mrs. Davenport declared to the other ladies, as Ethel

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and Richard started for an afternoon drive together. "She will not know anything more when she brings him back."

But in this Mrs. Davenport did wrong to Ethel's resources. The young wife did know something more when she brought her husband back from their drive through the pleasant country. They returned looking like an engaged couple, rather than parents whose nursery was already a song of three little voices.

"He has told her," thought Mrs. Davenport at the first sight of them, as they entered the drawing-room for an afternoon tea. "She does understand some things."

And when after dinner the ladies had withdrawn to the library, and waited for the men to finish their

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cigars, Mrs. Davenport spoke to Ethel. "My dear, I congratulate you. I saw it at once."

"But he hasn't. Richard hasn't told me anything."

"Ethel! Then what is the matter?"

"I told him something. I told him that if it was going to be any story about—about something I shouldn't like, I should simply follow it with a story about him that he wouldn't like."

"Ethel! You darling!"

"Oh, yes, and I said I was sure you would all listen, even though I was not an author myself. And I have it ready, you know, and it's awfully like Richard, only a different side of him from the burglar one."

"But, my dear, what did he do when you—"

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"I should like to smash the clock" (p.35)

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This enquiry was, however, cut short by the entrance of the men. And from the glance that came from Richard's eyes as they immediately sought out his wife, Mrs. Davenport knew that he could not have done anything very severe to Ethel when she made that threat to him during their drive.

Richard at once made his way to the easy-chair arranged each night in a good position for the narrator of the evening, and baptised "The Singstool" by Mr. Graves. Mr. Graves was an ardent Wagnerian, and especially devoted to *The Mastersingers of Nuremburg*.

"Shall we have," he whispered to Mr. Hillard, "a Beckmesser fiasco to-night, or will it be a Walter success?"

But Mr. Hillard, besides being an

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author and a critic, cared little for the too literary cleverness of Mr. Graves. He therefore heavily crushed that gentleman's allusion to Wagner's opera. "I remember," he said, "the singing contest between Beckmesser and Walter, and I doubt if we are to be afflicted with anything so dull in this house."

Richard had settled himself in the easy-chair, and was looking thoughtfully at various objects in the room, while the small-talk was subsiding around him.

"Why, Mr. Field," said Mrs. Davenport, "you look as if you could find nothing to suggest your story to you."

"On the contrary," said Richard, "it is the number of things that suggest it. This newspaper here,

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that has arrived since I was last in the room, has a column which reminds me very forcibly of the experience that I have selected to tell you. But I think the most appropriate of all is that picture." He pointed to the largest picture on the wall. "'Breaking Home Ties' is its title, I remember very well. It is a replica of the original that drew such crowds in the Art Building at the World's Fair."

While Richard was saying this, his wife had possessed herself of the newspaper, and he now observed how eagerly she was scanning its pages. "It is the financial column, Ethel, that recalls my story."

Ethel, after a hopeless glance at this, resumed her seat near the sofa by Mrs. Davenport.

"There were many paintings,"

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continued Richard, "in that Art Building, of merit incomparably greater than 'Breaking Home Ties'; and yet the crowd never looked at those, because it did not understand them. But at any hour of the day, if you happened to pass this picture, it took you some time to do so. You could pass any of John Sargeant's pictures, for instance, at a speed limited only by your own powers of running; but you could never run past 'Breaking Home Ties.' You had to work your way through the crowd in front of that just as you have to do at a fire, or a news office during a football game. The American people could never get enough of that mother kissing her boy good-bye, while the wagon waits at the open door to take him away from

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her upon his first journey into the world. The idea held a daily pathos for them. Many had themselves been through such leave takings; and no word so stirs the general heart as the word 'mother.' Song writers know this; and the artist knew it when he decided to paint 'Breaking Home Ties.' And 'MOTHER' is the title of my story to-night."

"'Mother!'" This was Ethel's bewildered echo, "Whose Mother?" she softly murmured to herself.

Richard continued. "It concerns the circumstances under which I became engaged to my wife."

There was a movement from Ethel as she sat by the sofa.

"Not all the circumstances, of course," the narrator continued,

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with a certain guarded candour in his tone. "There are certain circumstances which naturally attend every engagement between happy and—and devoted—young people, that they keep to themselves quite carefully, in spite of the fact that any one who has been through the experience of being engaged two or three times—"

There was another movement from Ethel by the sofa.

"—or even only once, as is my case," the narrator went on, "anybody, I say, who has been through the experience of being engaged only once, can form a very correct idea of the circumstances that attend the happy engagements of all young people. I imagine they prevail in all countries, just as the feeling about 'mother' prevails.

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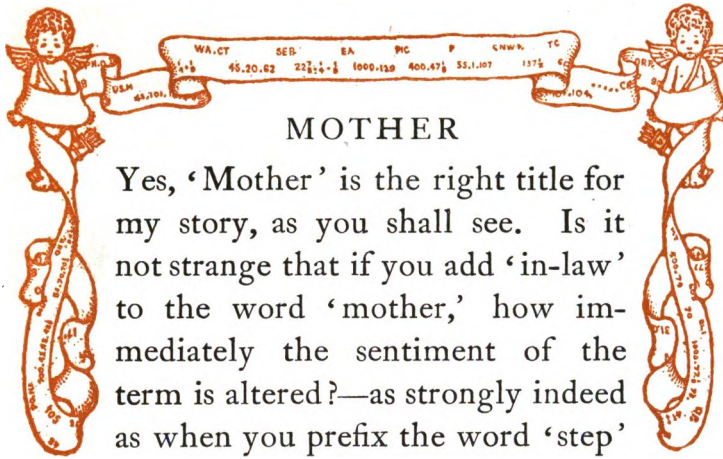


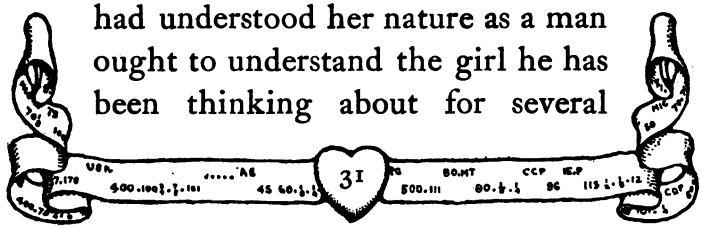
MOTHER

Yes, 'Mother' is the right title for my story, as you shall see. Is it not strange that if you add 'in-law' to the word 'mother,' how immediately the sentiment of the term is altered?—as strongly indeed as when you prefix the word 'step' to it. But it is with neither of these composite forms of mother that my story deals.

"Ethel has always maintained that if I had really understood her, it never would have happened. She says—"

"Richard, I"—

"My dear, you shall tell your story afterwards, and I promise to listen without a word until you are finished. Mrs. Field says that if I had understood her nature as a man ought to understand the girl he has been thinking about for several



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years, I should have known she cared nothing about my income."

"I didn't care! I'd have"—but Mrs. Field checked her outburst.

"She was going to say," said Mr. Field, "that had I asked her to marry me when I became sure that I wished to marry her, she would have been willing to leave New York and go to the waste land in Michigan that was her inheritance from a grandfather, and there build a cabin and live in it with me; and that while I shot prairie chickens for dinner she would have milked the cow which some member of the family would have been willing to give us as a wedding present instead of a statue of the Winged Victory, or silver spoons and forks, had we so desired."

Richard made a pause here, and

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looked at his wife as if he expected her to correct him. But Ethel was plainly satisfied with his statement, and he therefore continued.

"I think it is ideal when a girl is ready to do so much as that for a man. But I should not think it ideal in a man to allow the girl he loved to do it for him. Nor did I then know anything about the lands in Michigan—though this would have made no difference. Ethel had been accustomed to a house several stories high, with hot and cold water in most of them, and somebody to answer the door-bell."

"The door-bell!" exclaimed Ethel. "I could have gone without hearing that."

"Yes, Ethel, only to hear the welkin ring would have been enough

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for you. I know that you are sincere in thinking so. And the ringing welkin is all we should have heard in Michigan. But the more truly a man loves a girl, the less can he bear taking her from an easy to a hard life. I am sure that all the men here agree with me."

There was a murmur and a nod from the men, and also from Mrs. Davenport. But the other ladies gave no sign of assenting to Richard's proposition.

"In those days," said he, "I was what in the curt parlance of the street is termed a six-hundred-dollar clerk. And though my ears had grown accustomed to this appellation, I never came to feel that it completely described me. In passing Tiffany's window twice each day (for my habit was to walk to

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and from Nassau Street) I remember that seeing a thousand-dollar clock exposed for sale caused me annoyance. Of course my salary as a clerk brought me into no unfavourable comparison with the clock; and I doubt if I could make you understand my sometimes feeling when I passed Tiffany's window that I should like to smash the clock.

"I met Ethel frequently in society, dancing with her, and sitting next her at dinners. And by the time I had dined at her own house, and walked several afternoons with her, my lot as a six-hundred-dollar clerk began to seem very sad to me. I wrote verses about it, and about other subjects also. From an evening passed with Ethel, I would go next morning to the office and look

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at the other clerks. One of them was fifty-five, and he still received six hundred dollars—his wages for the last thirty years. I was then twenty-one; and though I never despaired to the extent of believing that years would fail to increase my value to the firm by a single cent, still, for what could I hope? If my salary were there and then to be doubled, what kind of support was twelve hundred dollars to offer Ethel, with her dresses, and her dinners, and her father's carriage? For two years I was wretchedly unhappy beneath the many hours of gaiety that came to me, as to every young man."

"Those two years we could have been in Michigan," said Ethel, "had you understood."

"I know. But understanding, I

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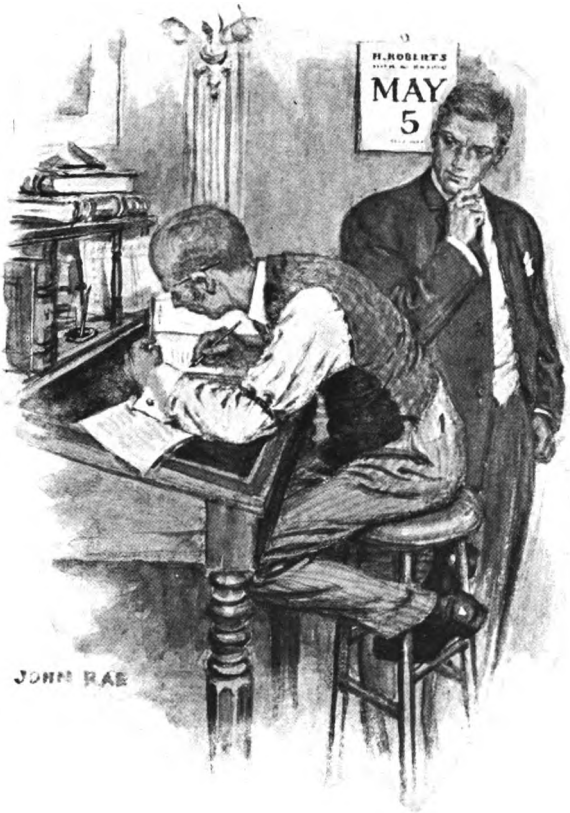

One of them was fifty-five, and he still received six-hundred dollars" (p.36)

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believe that I should do the same again. At the office when not busy, I wrote more poetry, and began also to write prose, which I found at the outset less easy. When my first writings were accepted (they were four sets of verses upon the Summer Resort) I felt that I could soon address Ethel; for I had made ten dollars outside my salary. Had she not been in Europe that July, I believe that I should have spoken to her at once. But I sent her the paper; and I have the letter that she wrote in reply."

"I"— began Ethel. But she stopped.

"Yes, I know now that you kept the verses," said Richard. "My next manuscript, however, was rejected. Indeed, I went on offering my literary productions nearly

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every week until the following January before a second acceptance came. It was twenty-five dollars this time, and almost made me feel again that I could handsomely support Ethel. But not quite. After the first charming elation at earning money with my pen, those weeks of refusal had caused me to think more soberly. And though I was now bent upon becoming an author and leaving Nassau Street, I burned no bridges behind me, but merely filled my spare hours with writing and with showing it to Ethel.

"It was now that the second great perturbation of my life came to me. I say the second, because the first had been the recent dawning belief that Ethel thought about me when I was not there to remind

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her of myself. This idea had stirred —but you will understand. And now, what was my proper, my honourable course? It was a positive relief that at this crisis she went to Florida. I could think more quietly. My writing had come to be quite often accepted, sometimes even solicited. Should I speak to her, and ask her to wait until I could put a decent roof over her head, or should I keep away from her until I could offer such a roof? Her father, I supposed, could do something for us. But I was not willing to be a pensioner. His business—were he generous—would be to provide cake and butter; but the bread was to be mine—and bread was still a long way off, according to New York standards. These things I thought over while she was in

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Florida; yet when once I should find myself with her again, I began to fear that I could not hold myself from—but these are circumstances which universal knowledge renders it needless to mention, and I will pass to the second perturbation.

"A sum of money was suddenly left me. Then for the first time I understood why I had during my boyhood been so periodically sent to see a cross old brother of my mother's, who lived near Cold Spring on the Hudson, and whom we called Uncle Snaggletooth when no one could hear us. Uncle Godfrey (for I have called him by his right name ever since) died and left me what in those old days six years ago was still a large amount. To-day we understand what true riches mean. But in those bygone

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times six years ago, a million dollars was a sum considerable enough to be still seen, as it were, with the naked eye. That was my bequest from Uncle Godfrey, and I felt myself to be the possessor of a fortune."

At this point in Richard's narrative, a sigh escaped from Ethel.

"I know," he immediately said, "that money is always welcome. But it is certainly some consolation to reflect how slight a loss a million dollars is counted to-day in New York. And I did not lose all of it.

"I met Ethel at the train on her return from Florida, and crossed with her on the ferry from Jersey City to Desbrosses Street. There I was obliged to see her drive away in the carriage with her father."

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MOTHER

"Mr. Field," said Mrs. Davenport, "what hour did that train arrive at Jersey City?"

Richard looked surprised. "Why, seven-fifteen P. M.," he replied. "The tenth of March."

"Dark!" Mrs. Davenport exclaimed. "Mr. Field, you and Ethel were engaged before the ferry boat landed at Desbrosses Street."

Richard and Ethel both sat straight up, but remained speechless.

"Pardon my interruption," said Mrs. Davenport, smiling. "I didn't want to miss a single point in this story—do go on!"

Richard was obliged to burst out laughing, in which Ethel, after a moment, followed him, though perhaps less heartily. And as he continued, his blush subsided.

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"With my Uncle Godfrey's legacy I was no longer dependent upon my salary, or my pen, or my father's purse; and I decided that with the money properly invested, I could maintain a modest establishment of my own. Ethel agreed with me entirely; and, after a little, we disclosed our plans to our families, and they met with approval. This was in April, and we thought of October or November for the wedding. It seemed long to wait; but it came near being so much longer, that I grow chilly now to think of it.

"Of course, I went steadily on with my work at the office in Nassau Street, nor did I neglect my writing entirely. My attention, however, was now turned to the question of investing my fortune.

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MOTHER

Just round the corner from our office was the firm of Blake and Beverly, Stocks and Bonds. Thither my steps began frequently to turn. Mr. Beverly had business which brought him every week to the room of our president; and so having a sort of acquaintance with him, I felt it easier to consult him than to seek any other among the brokers, to which class I was a well-nigh total stranger. He very kindly consented to be my adviser. I was well pleased to find how much I had underrated the interest-bearing capacity of my windfall. 'Four per cent!' he cried, when I told him this was the extent of my expectations. 'Why, you're talking like a trustee.' And then seeing that his meaning was beyond me, he explained in his bluff, humorous

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manner. 'All a trustee cares for, you know, is his reputation for safety. It's not his own income he's nursing, and so he doesn't care how small he makes it, provided only that his investments would be always called safe. Now there are ways of being safe without spending any trouble or time upon it; and those are the ways a trustee will take. For example,' and here he arose, and unhooking a file of current quotations from the wall, placed it in my lap as I sat beside him. 'Now here are Government three's selling at 108 3-8. They are as safe as the United States; and if I advised you to buy them, it would cost me no thought, and my character for safety would run no risk of a blemish. That is the sort of bond that a trustee recommends. But see

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what income it gives you. Roughly speaking, about twenty-eight thousand dollars.'

"'That would not do at all,' said I, thinking of Ethel and October.

"'Certainly not for you,' returned Mr. Beverly, gaily. If you were a timorous old maid, now, who would really like all her money in her stocking in gold pieces, only she's ashamed to say so! But a young fellow like you with no responsibility, no wife, and butcher's bill—it's quite another thing!'

"'Quite,' said I, 'oh, quite!'"

"Richard," interrupted Ethel, "do you have to make yourself out so simple?"

"My dear, you forget that I said I should invent nothing, but should keep myself to actual experiences. The part of my story that is com-

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"I explained many other things about investments and the stock market to her" (p. 58)

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ing now is one where I should be very glad to draw upon my imagination.

"Mr. Beverly now ran his finger up and down various columns. 'Here again,' said he, 'is a typical trustee bond, and nets you a few thousand dollars more at present prices. New York Central and Hudson River 3 1-2's. Or here are West Shore 4's at 113 5-8. But you see it scales down to pretty much the same thing. The sort of bond that a trustee will call safe does not bring the owner more than about three and one-half per cent.'

"'Why, there are some six per cent bonds!' I said; and I pointed them out to him.

"'Selling at 137 7-8, you see,' said Mr. Beverly. 'Deducting the

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tax, there you are scaled down again.' He pencilled some swift calculations. 'There,' said he. And I nearly understood them. 'Now I'm not here to stop your buying that sort of petticoat and canary-bird wafer,' continued Mr. Beverly. 'It's the regular trustee move, and nobody could criticise you if you made it. It's what I call thoughtless safety, and it brings you about 3 1-2 per cent, as I have already shown you. Anybody can do it.'

"These words of Mr. Beverly made me feel that I did not want to do what anybody could do. 'There is another kind of safety which I call thoughtful safety,' said he. 'Thoughtful, because it requires you to investigate properties and their earnings, and generally to use your independent judgment after

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a good deal of work. And all this a trustee greatly dislikes. It rewards you with five and even six per cent, but that is no stimulus to a trustee.'

"Something in me had leaped when Mr. Beverly mentioned six per cent. Again I thought of Ethel and October, and what a difference it would be to begin our modest housekeeping on sixty instead of forty thousand dollars a year, outside of what I was earning.

"Mr. Beverly now rang a bell. 'You happen to have come,' said he, 'on a morning when I can really do something for you out of the common. Bring me (it was a clerk he addressed) one of those Petunia circulars. Now here you can see at a glance for yourself.' He began reading the prospectus

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rapidly aloud to me while I followed its paragraphs with my own eye. His strong, well-polished thumb-nail ran heavily but speedily down the columns of figures and such words as gross receipts, increase of population, sinking fund, redeemable at 105 after 1920, churned vigorously and meaninglessly through my brain. But I was not going to let him know that to understand the circular I should have to take it away quietly to my desk in Nassau Street, and spend an hour with it alone.

"'What is your opinion of Petunia Water sixes?' he inquired.

"'They are a lead-pipe cinch,' I immediately answered; and he slapped me on the knee.

"'That's what I think!' he cried. 'Anyhow, I have taken

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20,000 for mother. Do what you like.'

"'Oh well,' said I, delighted at this confidence, 'I think I can afford to risk what you are willing to risk for your mother, Mrs. Beverly. Where is Petunia, did you say?'

"He pulled down a roller map on the wall as you draw down a window-blind, and again I listened to statements that churned in my brain. Petunia was a new resort on the sea-coast of New Hampshire. One railway system did already connect it with both Portsmouth and Portland, but it was not a very direct connection at present. Yet in spite of this, the population had increased 23 and seven-tenths per cent in five years, and now an electric railway was in construction that would double the population

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in the next five years. This was less than what had happened to other neighbouring resorts under identical conditions; yet with things as they now were, the company was earning two per cent on its stock, which was being put into improvements. The stock was selling at 30, and if a dividend was paid next year, it would go to par. But Mr. Beverly did not counsel buying the stock. 'I did not let mother have any,' he said, 'though I took some myself. But the bonds are different. You're getting the last that will be sold at par. In three days they will be placed before the public at 102½ and interest.'

"I was well pleased when I left Mr. Beverly's office. In a few days I was still more pleased to learn that

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I could sell my Petunia sixes for 104 if I so wished. But I did not wish it, and Mr. Beverly told me that he should not sell his mother's unless they went to 110. 'In that case,' said he, 'it might be worth while to capitalise her premium.'

"I liked the idea of capitalising one's premium. If you had fifty bonds that cost you par, and sold them at 110, you would then buy at par fifty-five bonds of some other rising kind, and go on doing this until—I named no limit for this process; but my delighted mind saw visions of eighty and a hundred thousand a year—comfort at least, if not affluence in New York—and I explained to Ethel what the phrase capitalising one's premium meant. I showed her the Petunias, too, and we read what it said on

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the coupons aloud together. Ethel was at first not quite satisfied with the arrangement of the coupons. 'Thirty dollars on January first, and thirty on July first,' she said. 'That seems a long while to wait for those payments, Richard. And there are only two in every year, though you pay them a thousand dollars all at once. It does not seem very prompt on their part.' I told her that this was the rule. 'But,' she urged, 'don't you think that a man like Mr. Beverly might be able to get them to make an exception if he explained the circumstances? Other people may be satisfied with waiting for little crumbs in this way, but why should we?' I soon made her understand how it was, however, and I explained many other facts about

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investments and the stock market to her, as I learned them. It was a great pleasure to do this. We came to talk about finance even more than we talked of my writings; for during that Spring I invested a good deal more rapidly than I wrote. The Petunias had taken only one-twentieth of my million dollars; and though Mr. Beverly warned me to rush hastily into nothing, and pointed out the good sense of distributing my eggs in a number of baskets, still we both agreed that the sooner all my money was bringing me five or six per cent, the better.

"I have come to think that it might be well were women taught the elements of investing as they are now taught French and Music. I would not have the French and

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Music dropped, but I would add the other. It might be more of a protection to women than being able to read a French novel, and perhaps some day we shall have it so. But of course it had been left totally out of Ethel's education; and at first she merely received my instruction and took my opinions. It was not long, however, before she began to entertain some of her own, obliging me not infrequently to reason with her. I very well remember the first occasion that this happened.

"We had been as usual talking about stocks, as we walked on the Riverside Drive on a Sunday afternoon in May. Ethel had been for some moments silent. 'Richard,' she finally began, 'if I had had the naming of these things, I should

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never have called them securities. Insecurities comes a great deal nearer what they are. What right has a thing that says on its face it is worth a thousand dollars to go bobbing up and down in the way most of them do? I think that *securities* is almost sarcastic. And have you noticed the price of those Petunias?'

"I had, of course, noticed it; but I had not mentioned it to Ethel 'I read the papers now,' she explained, 'morning and evening. Of course the market is off a little on account of the bank statement. But that is not enough to account for the Petunias.'

"'Ethel, you are nervous,' I said. 'And it is the papers which make you so. The Petunias are a first lien on the whole prop-

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erty, of which the assessed valuation—'

"'What is the good,' she interrupted, 'of a first lien on something which depends on politics for its existence, if the politicians change their minds? Did you not see that bill they're thinking of passing?'

"I was startled by what Ethel told me, for the article in the paper had escaped my notice. But Mr. Beverly explained it to me in a couple of minutes. 'Ha!' he jovially exclaimed, on my entering his office on Monday morning; 'you want to know about Petunias. They opened at 85 I see.' He then ran the tape from the ticker through his clean strong hands. 'Here they are again. Five thousand sold at 83. Now, if they go to 70, I'll very likely take ten thousand more

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"You and Ethel were engaged before the ferry boat landed at Desbrosses Street" (p. 44)

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for mother. It's all Frank Smith's bluff, you know. He wants a jag of the water-works stock, more than they say they agreed he should have. So he's shaking this bill over them, which would allow the city to build its own water-plant, and of course run the present company out of business. Not a thing in it! All bluff. He'll get the stock, I suppose. What's that?' he broke off to a clerk who came with a message. 'Wants 500 preferred does he? Buyer 30? Very well, he can't have it. Say so from me. Now,' he resumed to me, 'take a cigar by the way. And don't buy any more Petunias until I tell you the right moment. Do you see where your Amalgamated Electric has gone to?'

"I had seen this. It had scored a 20-point rise since my purchase

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of it; and I felt very sorry that I had not taken Mr. Beverly's advice and bought a thousand shares. It had been on a day when I had felt unaccountably cautious, and I had taken only two hundred and fifty shares of Amalgamated Electric. There are days when one is cautious and days when one is venturesome; and they seem to have nothing to do with results.

"'They're going to increase the dividend,' said Mr. Beverly, as I smoked his excellent cigar. 'It's good for twenty points higher by the end of the week. I had just got mother a few more shares.'

"I left Mr. Beverly's office the possessor of two thousand shares of Amalgamated Electric, and also entirely reassured about my Petunias. He always made me feel happy.

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His keen laughing brown eyes, and crisp well-brushed hair, and big somewhat English way of chaffing (he had gone to Oxford, where he had rowed on a winning crew) carried a sense of buoyant prosperity that went with his wiry figure and good smart London clothes. His face was almost as tawny as an Indian's with the outdoor life that he took care to lead. I was always flattered when he could spare any time to clap me on the shoulder and crack a joke.

"Amalgamated Electric had risen five more points before the board closed that afternoon. This was the first news that I told Ethel.

"'Richard,' said she, 'I wish you would sell that stock to-morrow.'

"But this I saw no reason for; and on Tuesday it had gained seven

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points further. Ethel still more strongly urged me to sell it. I must freely admit that." And the narrator paused reflectively.

"Thank you, Richard," said Ethel from the sofa. "And I admit that I could give you no reason for my request, except that it all seemed so sudden. And—yes—there was one other thing. But that was even more silly."

"I believe I know what you mean," replied Richard, "and I shall come to it presently. If any one was silly, it was not you.

"I did not sell Amalgamated Electric on Wednesday, and on Thursday a doubt about the increased dividend began to be circulated. The stock, nevertheless, after a forenoon of weakness, rallied. Moreover, a check for my first dividend

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came from the Pollyopolis Heat, Light, Power, Paving, Pressing, and Packing Company.

"'What a number of things it does!' exclaimed Ethel, when I showed her the company's check.

"'Yes,' I replied, and quoted Browning to her: 'Twenty-nine distinct damnations. One sure if the other fails.' Beverly's mother has a lot of it.'

"But Ethel did not smile. 'Richard,' she said, 'I do wish you had more investments with ordinary simple names, like New York and New Haven, or Chicago and Northwestern.' And when I told her that I thought this was really unreasonable, she was firm. 'Yes,' she replied, 'I don't like the names—not most of them, at least. Dutchess and Columbia Traction sounds

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pretty well; and besides that, of course one knows how successful these electric railways are. But take the Standard Egg Trust, and the Patent Pasteurised Infant Rubber Feeder Company.'

"'Why, Ethel!' I exclaimed, 'those are both based upon great inventions, Mr. Beverly—'

"But she interrupted me earnestly. 'I know about those inventions, Richard, for I have procured the prospectuses. And I wish that I could have told you my own feeling about them before you bought any of the stock.'

"'I do not think you can fully have taken it in, Ethel.'

"'I trust that it may not have fully taken you in,' she replied. 'Have you noticed what those stocks are selling for at present?'

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"Of course I had noticed this. I had paid 63 for Standard Egg, and it was now 48, while 11 was the price of Patent Pasteurized Feeder, for which I had paid 20. But this, Mr. Beverly assured me, was a normal and even healthy course for a new stock. 'Had they gone up too soon and too high,' he explained, 'I should have suspected some crooked manipulation and advised selling at once. But this indicates a healthy absorption preliminary to a natural rise. I should not dream of letting mother part with hers.'

"The basis of Standard Egg was not only a monopoly of all the hens in the United States, but a machine called a Separator, for telling the age and state of an egg by means of immersion in water. Perfectly good eggs sank fast and passed out

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through one distributer; fairly nice eggs did not reach the bottom, and were drawn off through another sluice, and so on. This saved the wages of the egg twirlers, whose method of candling eggs, as it was called, was far less rapid than the Separator. And when I learned that one house in St. Louis alone twirled 50,000 eggs in a day, the possible profits of the Egg Trust became clear to me. But they were not so clear to Ethel. She said that you could not monopolise hens. That they would always be laying eggs and putting it in the power of competitors to hatch them by incubators. Nor did she have confidence in the Pasteurised Feeder. 'Even if you get the parents to adopt it,' she said, 'you cannot get the children. If they do not like the taste

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of the milk as it comes out of the bottle through the Feeder, they will simply not take it.'

"'Well,' I answered, 'old Mrs. Beverly is holding on to hers.'

"When I said this, Ethel sat with her mouth tight. Then she opened it and said: 'I hate that woman.'

"'Hate her? Why you have never so much as laid eyes on her.'

"'That is not at all necessary. I consider it indecent for a grey-haired woman with grandchildren to be speculating in the stock market every week like a regular bull or bear.'

"Every point in this outburst of Ethel's seemed to me so unwarrantable that I was quite dazed. I sat looking at her, and her eyes filled with tears. 'Oh Richard!' she ex-

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claimed, 'she will ruin you, and I hate her!'

"'My dear Ethel,' I replied, 'she will not. And only see how you are making it all up out of your head. You have never seen her, but you speak of her as a grey-haired grandmother.'

"'She must be, Richard. You have told me that Mr. Beverly is a married man and about forty-five. No doubt he has older sisters and brothers. But if he has not, his mother can hardly be less than sixty-five, and he has probably been married for several years. He might easily have a daughter coming out, next winter, and a son at Harvard or Yale; and if their grandmother's hair is not grey, that is quite as unnatural as her speculating in monopolised eggs in this way at

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her age. She must be a very unladylike person.'

"Ethel, I saw, was excited. Therefore I made no more point of her theories concerning the appearance and family circle of old Mrs. Beverly. But in justice to myself I felt obliged to remind her, first, that I was investing, not speculating, and second, that it was Mr. Beverly's advice I was following, and not that of his mother. 'Had he not spoken of her,' I said, 'I should have remained unaware of her existence.'

"'She is at the bottom of it all the same,' said Ethel. 'Everything you have bought has been because she bought it.'

"'That is not quite the right way to put it,' I replied. 'I was willing to buy these securities because Mr.

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Beverly thought so highly of them that he felt justified in—'

"'There is no use,' interrupted Ethel, 'in our going round this circle as if we were a pair of squirrels. I do not ask you to hate that woman for my sake, but I cannot change my own feeling. Do you remember, Richard, about the City of Philippi Sewer Bonds? You did not want to buy them at first. You told me yourself that you thought new towns in Texas were apt to buzz suddenly and then die because all the people hurried away to some newer town and left the houses and stores standing empty. But Mr. Beverly's mother got some, and all your hesitation fled. And now I see that the Gulf, Galveston, and Little Rock is going to build a branch that may make

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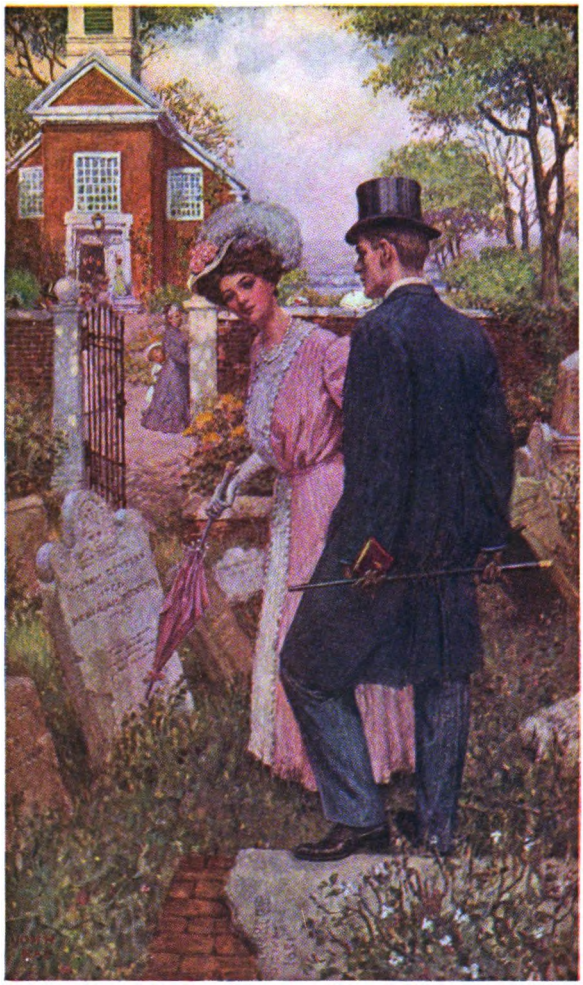

"We paused before brown old head-stones with Beverly upon them" (p. 88)

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Philippi a perfectly evaporated town. If you sold these bonds to-day, how much would you lose?'

'I did not enjoy telling Ethel how much, but I had to. 'Only fifteen thousand dollars,' I said.

"'Only!' said Ethel. 'Well, I hope his mother will lose a great deal more than that.'

"It is seldom that Ethel taps her foot, but she had begun to tap it now; and this inclined me to avoid any attempt at a soothing reply, in the hope that silence might prove still more soothing, and that thus we might get away from old Mrs. Beverly.

"'She cannot possibly be less than sixty-five,' Ethel presently announced. 'And she is far more likely to be seventy.'

"I thought it best to agree to any

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age that Ethel chose to give the old lady.

"'Do you suppose,' Ethel continued, 'that she does it by telephone?'

"'My dearest,' I responded, 'he must do it all for her, of course, you know.'

"'I doubt that very much, Richard. And she strikes me as being the sort of character for whom a mere telephone would not be enough excitement. The nerves of those people require more and more stimulants to give them any sensation at all. I believe that she sits in his private office and watches the ticker.'

"'Why not give her a ticker in her bedroom while you are about it, Ethel?' I suggested.

"But Ethel could not smile. 'I

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think that is perfectly probable,' she answered. And then, 'Oh, Richard, isn't it mean!' At this I took her hand, and she— but again I abstain from dwelling upon those circumstances of the engaged which are familiar to you all.

"The change of May into June, and the change of June into July, did not mellow Ethel's bitter feelings. I remember the day after Petunias defaulted on their interest, that she exclaimed, 'I hope I shall never meet her!' We always called Mr. Beverly's mother 'she' now. 'For if I were to meet her,' continued Ethel, 'I feel I should say something that I should regret. Oh, Richard, I suppose we shall have to give up that house on Park Avenue!'

"I put a cheerful and even jocular

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face on the matter, for I could not bear to see Ethel so depressed. But it was hard work for me. Some few of my investments were evidently good; but it always seemed as if it was into these that I had happened to put not much money, while the bulk of my fortune was entangled in the others. Besides the usual Midsummer faintness that overtakes the stock market, my own specialties were a good deal more than faint. On the 20th of August I took the afternoon train to spend my two weeks' holiday at Lenox; and during much of the journey I gazed at the Wall Street edition of the afternoon paper that I had purchased as I came through the Grand Central Station. Ethel and I read it in the evening.

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"'I wonder what she's buying now?' said Ethel, vindictively.

"'Well, I can't help feeling sorry for her,' I answered, with as much of a smile as I could produce.

"'That is so unnecessary, Richard! She can easily afford to gratify her gambling instinct.'

"'There you go, Ethel, inventing millions for her just as you invented grandchildren.'

"'Not at all. Unless she constantly had money lying idle, she could not take these continual plunges. She is an old woman with few expenses, and she lives well within her income. You would hear of her entertaining if it was otherwise. So instead of conservatively investing her surplus, she makes ducks and drakes of it in her son's office. Is he at Hyde Park

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now?' Hyde Park was where the old Beverly country seat had always been.

"'No,' I answered. 'He went to Europe early last month.'

"'Very likely he took her with him. She is probably at Monte Carlo.'

"'Scarcely in August, I fancy. And I'll tell you what, Ethel. I have been counting it up. She has lost twenty-four thousand dollars in the Standard Egg alone. It takes a good deal of surplus to stand that.'

"'Serve her right,' said Ethel. 'And I would say so to her face.'

"September brought freshness to the stock market but not to me. Mr. Beverly, like the well-to-do man that he was, remained away in Europe until October should require his presence as a guiding

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hand in the office. Thus was I left without his buoyant consolation in the face of my investments.

"Petunias were being adjusted on a four per cent basis; Dutchess and Columbia Traction was holding its own; I could not complain of Amalgamated Electric, though it was now lower than when I had bought it, while had I sold it on that Wednesday in May when Ethel begged me, before the increased dividend turned out a mistake, I should have made money. But Philippi Sewers were threatened; Pasteurised Feeders had been numb since June; Pollyopolis Heat, Light, Power, Paving, Pressing, and Packing was going to pass its quarterly dividend; and Standard Egg had gone down from 63 to 7⅛. My million dollars on paper

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now was worth in reality less than a quarter of that sum, and although we could still make both ends meet fairly well in some place where you wouldn't want to live, like Philadelphia, in New York we should drop into a pinched and dwarfed obscurity.

"I must say now, and I shall never forget, that Ethel during these gloomy weeks behaved much better than I did. The greyer the outlook became, the more words of hope and sense she seemed to find. She reminded me that, after all, my Uncle Godfrey's legacy had been a thing unlooked for, something out of my scheme of life; that I had my youth, my salary, and my writing; and that she would wait till she was as old as Mr. Beverly's mother.

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"It was the thought of that lady which brought from Ethel the only note of complaint she uttered in my presence during that whole dreary month.

"We were spending Sunday with a house party at Hyde Park; and driving to church, we passed an avenue gate with a lodge. 'Rockhurst, sir,' said the coachman. 'Whose place?' I inquired. 'The old Beverly place, sir.' Ethel heard him tell me this; and as we went on, we saw a carriage and pair coming down the avenue toward the gate with that look which horses always seem to have when they are taking the family to church on Sunday morning.

"'If I see her,' said Ethel to me as we entered the door, 'I shall be unable to say my prayers.'

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"But only young people came into the Beverly pew, and Ethel said her prayers and also sang the hymns and chants very sweetly.

"After the service, we strolled together in the old and lovely graveyard before starting homeward. We had told them that we should prefer to walk back. The day was beautiful, and one could see a little blue piece of the river, sparkling.

"'Here is where they are all buried,' said Ethel, and we paused before brown old headstones with Beverly upon them. 'Died 1750; died 1767,' continued Ethel, reading the names and inscriptions. 'I think one doesn't mind the idea of lying in such a place as this.'

"Some of the young people in the pew now came along the path. 'The grandchildren,' said Ethel.

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"He then ran the tape from the ticker through his clean strong hands" (p. 62.)

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'She is probably too old to come to church. Or she is in Europe.'

"The young people had brought a basket with flowers from their place, and now laid them over several of the grassy mounds. 'Give me some of yours,' said one to the other, presently; 'I've not enough for grandmother's.'

"Ethel took me rather sharply by the arm. 'Did you hear that?' she asked.

"'It can't be she, you know,' said I. 'He would have come back from Europe.'

"But we found it out at lunch. It was she, and she had been dead for fifteen years.

"Ethel and I talked it over in the train going up to town on Monday morning. We had by that time grown calmer. 'If it is not false

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pretences,' said she, 'and you cannot sue him for damages, and if it is not stealing or something, and you cannot put him in prison, what are you going to do to him, Richard?'

"As this was a question which I had frequently asked myself during the night, having found no satisfactory answer to it, I said: 'What would you do in my place, Ethel?' But Ethel knew.

"'I should find out when he sails, and meet his steamer with a cowhide.'

"'Then he would sue me for damages.'

"'That would be nothing, if you got a few good cuts in on him.'

"'Ethel,' I said, 'please follow me carefully. I should like dearly to cowhide him, and for the sake of

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argument we will consider it done. Then comes the lawsuit. Then I get up and say that I beat him because he made me buy Standard Egg at 63 by telling me that his mother had some, when really the old lady had been dead for fifteen years. When I think of it in this way, I do not feel—'

"'I know,' interrupted Ethel, 'you are afraid of ridicule. All men are.'

"Had Ethel insisted, I believe that I should have cowhided Mr. Beverly for her sake. But before his return our destinies were brightened. Copper had been found near Ethel's waste lands in Michigan, and the family business man was able to sell the property for seven hundred thousand dollars. He did this so promptly that I ventured to

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ask him if delay might not have brought a greater price. 'Well,' he said, 'I don't know. You must seize these things. Blake and Beverly might have got tired waiting.'

"'Blake and Beverly!' I exclaimed. 'So they made the purchase. Is Mr. Beverly back?'

"'Just back. To tell the truth I don't believe they're finding so much copper as they hoped.'

"This turned out to be true. And I am not sure that the business man had not known it all the while. 'We looked over the property pretty thoroughly at the time of the Tamarack excitement,' he said. And in a few days more, in fact, it was generally known that this land had returned to its old state of not quite paying the taxes.

"Then I paid my visit to Mr.

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Beverly, but with no cowhide. 'Mr. Beverly,' said I, 'I want to announce to you my engagement to Miss Ethel Lansing, whose Michigan copper land you have lately acquired. I hope that you bought some for your mother.'

"Those," concluded Mr. Richard Field, "are the circumstances attending my engagement which I felt might interest you. And now, Ethel, tell your story, if they'll listen."

"Richard," said Ethel, "that is the story I was going to tell."

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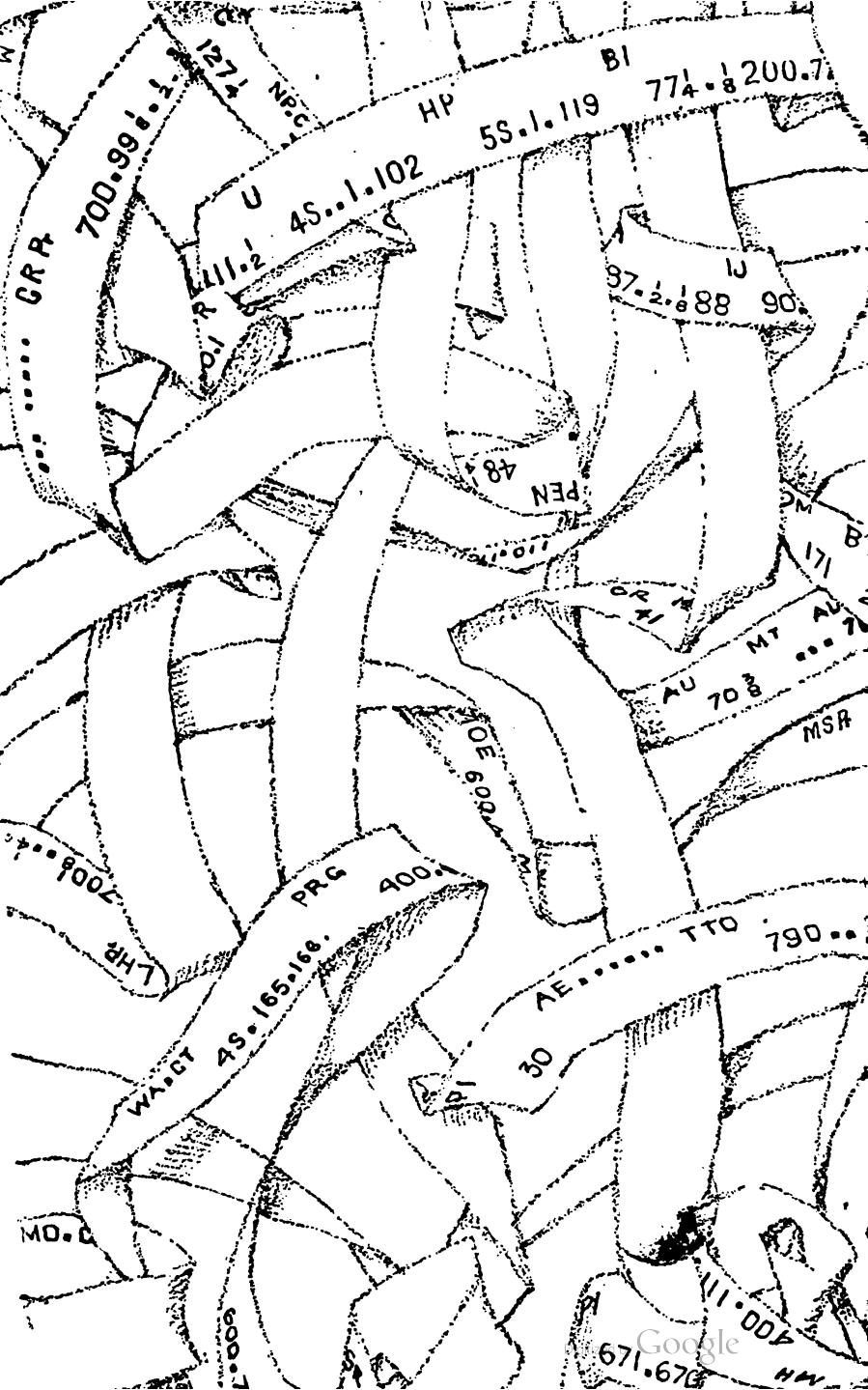
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